



# Recent Publications

## FEATURED BOOK REVIEW ESSAY

### The Call to Reform Liberal Education: Great Books of 1987

Susan Klingberg

**Bloom, Allan.** *The Closing of the American Mind: How Higher Education Has Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Souls of Today's Students.* New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987. 392p. \$18.95 (ISBN 0-671-47990-3). LC 86-24768.

**Boyer, Ernest L.** *College: The Undergraduate Experience in America.* New York: Harper, 1987. 328p. (ISBN 0-06-015507-8). LC 85-45182.

**Hirsch, Jr., E. D.** *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know.* Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987. 251p. \$16.95 (ISBN 0-395-43095-X). LC 86-21352.

**Ravitch, Diane, and Chester E. Finn, Jr.** *What Do Our 17-Year-Olds Know? A Report on the First National Assessment of History and Literature.* New York: Harper, 1987. 293p. \$15.95 (ISBN 0-06-015849-2). LC 87-45432.

**Wolf, Howard,** *The Education of a Teacher: Essays on American Culture.* Buffalo,

N.Y.: Prometheus Books, 1987. 299p. \$22.95 (ISBN 0-87975-374-9). LC 87-10885.

A remarkable number of titles was published in 1987 analyzing college teaching and learning and the educational achievement of college students. Four of the most significant titles are discussed here. Since academic preparation for college is a closely related topic, *What Do Our 17-Year-Olds Know?* is also reviewed. This clustering of titles on undergraduate education signals a strong trend toward assessing student literacy levels and improving college-level instruction. This reform movement is not taking place solely within academe. These serious works, published in trade presses, are reaching a very wide popular audience. Both *Closing of the American Mind* and *Cultural Literacy* have enjoyed a number of weeks on the *New York Times* best-seller list.

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Many striking similarities exist among these five titles. First, with the exception of Wolf's book, a collection of essays spanning twenty years, the views expressed are conservative. The current educational reform movement is a conservative, back-to-basics movement, and these books are representative of it. The politics of education swing back and forth, like a pendulum, left to right. The reform movement of the eighties is a right-of-center response to the university reforms of the sixties, which grew out of leftist student activism.

This essay aims to explore the following important themes these works have in common:

1. Literate Americans share a core body of knowledge.
2. What an educated person should know is definable.
3. Teaching should emphasize mastery of content over skills development.
4. Knowledge has an important cultural component (cultural literacy).
5. A return to a structured curriculum is needed.
6. Good assessment programs are essential to the quality of teaching and learning.
7. College success or failure is dependent on solid academic preparation (pre-school to high school).

### **THE CLOSING OF THE AMERICAN MIND**

*The Closing of the American Mind* is a strong, personal indictment of the current moral, social, and intellectual orders prevailing in the U.S. According to author Allan Bloom, liberal education is in crisis, reflecting nationwide decay. Bloom's description of the decline of liberal education draws heavily on his long career teaching classics at Cornell and the University of Chicago.

The author views the four years of liberal-arts education as a charmed opportunity for the privileged young Americans who enjoy them. The college years are a grace period following the intellectual and cultural wasteland of adolescence and preceding the likelihood of dreary professional training. During those years, students have the unique opportunity to ex-

pand experience, explore alternatives, and engage in self-discovery. They can begin to fulfill their human potential by exploring such central philosophical questions as, What is man? (p.21).

Bloom observes that entering freshmen are ill prepared to answer these questions because of weak educational backgrounds. Instead of concentrating on mastery of content, their previous education has emphasized methods and approaches such as openness and tolerance. Students are taught the wrongheaded notion of cultural relativism, which contends that all cultures and values are equal. Bloom, who has a marked preference for European culture, insists that they are not; in seeking what is true and good, students should be encouraged to examine alternatives, weigh differences, and make distinctions based on relative value. Bloom also finds students ignorant of their political heritage and lacking in the moral education that previous generations received through religion and the family, two institutions now in decline. Students do not bring to college strong beliefs that they can then challenge and question. He comments "One has to have the experience of really believing before one can have the thrill of liberation" (p.43).

Bloom prescribes a remedy addressing the ills of the liberal education curriculum. He believes that the university needs to develop a vision of what constitutes an educated person. He is in favor of the core curriculum concept because it represents the unity of knowledge and because it implies that "there are some things one must know about if one is to be educated" (p.320).

He advocates designing a curriculum that will appeal to and nourish the student who is undecided on a concentration or major, who might say "I am a whole human being. Help me to form myself in my wholeness and let me develop my real potential" (p.339). Currently universities unwittingly encourage lower-division students to specialize early because they have nothing to offer the undecided major.

Bloom points out that the curriculum reform movement of the eighties is part of a cycle, a reaction to the dismantling of cur-

riculum requirements during the sixties campus unrest. The current university reform movement advocates a core curriculum. The author describes three possible approaches: a general education curriculum, in which students take introductory courses in general divisions of knowledge; interdisciplinary composite courses that are specially developed for general education purposes, such as "Man in Nature" and "War and Moral Responsibility"; and the "great books" approach. The third alternative, favored by Bloom, is the reading of classic texts, which themselves dictate key questions and the methods of analysis. He would center the curriculum on these texts and would also open up students' minds to the important European philosophers (Rousseau, Kant, Hegel, and Nietzsche).

In spite of his clear preference for this "great books/great thinkers" approach, Bloom provides an evenhanded analysis and acknowledges its weaknesses: the problems of determining and selecting the great books; the impossibility of reading and studying all of them carefully; the notion that the books are the ends rather than the means; and the reputation of the movement as amateurish, evangelistic, and lacking in good taste.

Based on his own teaching, Bloom describes the engagement and intellectual excitement experienced by students reading the great texts. From these works, they learn about the key philosophical questions as well as the process and methods for analyzing and responding to them.

Bloom is most astute and credible when he analyzes and attempts to resolve educational issues and problems. However he also devotes several lengthy chapters to analyzing the American student soul, including youth culture and politics. Unfortunately this analysis suffers from a profound generation gap. Bloom demonstrates a narrow, crabbed point of view and a lofty, professorial tone, providing little evidence of understanding or empathy with youth culture. He is dismayed by liberated sexual relationships and believes that rock music is addictive and dangerous. His exaggerated and priggish responses are sometimes humorous. For example he observes that rock music has

"the beat of sexual intercourse" (p.73) and the strange power to ruin the imaginations of young people. The author has an unfortunate tendency to turn personal observations into social theories that are more anecdotal than scientific. For example, from his own teaching he concludes that students of divorced parents exhibit "a slight deformity of the spirit" and "are not as open to the serious study of philosophy and literature as some other students are" (p.120).

#### COLLEGE: THE UNDERGRADUATE EXPERIENCE IN AMERICA

While Bloom writes from personal experience and in his own voice, *College* is a study of undergraduate education funded by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, headed by Ernest L. Boyer. Boyer's prose is grander in tone than Bloom's, befitting the book's venerable sponsor. To conduct this study, observers were sent to twenty-nine colleges and universities to get firsthand accounts of campus life. In addition, a national survey of undergraduates and faculty members, representative of different institutions, was undertaken.

Like Bloom, the Carnegie report expresses concern about the conflict in the undergraduate curriculum between specialized majors and the need to provide "a coherent view of the human condition" (p.4). The study reviewed the distribution requirements of general education programs at several colleges, but the report rejects this approach as ineffective because of the enormous number of humanities, natural sciences, and social science courses available. Choosing several from each division with no established connections is more likely to be a smorgasboard than a well-coordinated, nourishing meal.

To achieve general education goals, the report recommends the integrated core approach, capable of imparting essential knowledge, linking knowledge to life beyond campus, and making connections across disciplines. The core approach relates the curriculum to the universal experiences and activities shared by all people. It consists of seven areas of inquiry that cut across disciplines:

- Language: the crucial connection
- Art: the aesthetic experience
- Heritage: the living past
- Institutions: the social web
- Nature: ecology of the planet
- Work: the value of vocation
- Identity: the search for meaning (p.91-92).

This approach to curriculum development is based on several firmly held beliefs. The report asserts that it is possible to define a basic core of knowledge that all students should be taught and should master to become educated persons. This core knowledge, which is not explicitly outlined in the report, is called "common learning." Common learning is not just an end in itself, but a way to discover and understand oneself and to develop a capacity for sound judgment. The implicit challenge to individual colleges is to define common learning, with its emphasis on breadth, and to integrate it successfully with the specialized knowledge acquired through academic majors.

Developing a strong sense of community in students is also recommended. The integrated core is designed not only to promote self-understanding but also to make students aware that they are part of the human community and that their existence has meaning because of others. Building community can be furthered through the academic program. Students should be encouraged to participate in collaborative activities such as group projects and in small sections within large lecture classes.

In this assessment of liberal arts programs, reforming the curriculum is a central theme. Seven other problem areas are also identified as undermining the success of the liberal arts program: the discontinuity between high schools and colleges, including poor academic preparation; the conflicting faculty priorities of research, teaching, and service; a lack of vigor and commitment in teaching and learning; governing of the college; evaluating educational outcomes; the quality of campus life; and the relationship between the campus and the world.

The site visits to campuses pinpointed another weakness in the undergraduate program: the gap between the classroom

and the library. Observers noted that textbooks were the primary teaching resources. Students viewed the library primarily as a quiet place to study and to read materials on reserve. The study's written survey of undergraduates revealed that one in four does not use the library at all during a normal week, and 65 percent spend four hours or less in the library. The report also notes that college libraries are not adequately supported. With reference to previous studies using ACRL standards, it notes that only half of four-year college libraries meet the minimum standards for collections, staff, budgets, and services.

In spite of these serious criticisms of undergraduate education, the report's outlook is not gloomy. The prologue gives a very balanced summary of the strengths and weaknesses of the American college. It is presented as a vital but troubled institution, in need of renewal. To quote from the prologue, "It is not that the failure of the undergraduate college is so large but that institutional expectations often are too small" (p.2).

### CULTURAL LITERACY

Unlike the first two books, which primarily critique the college experience, *Cultural Literacy* is not limited to one particular educational level. E. D. Hirsch is concerned with *all* levels of schooling and focuses on the process of teaching the specific knowledge that each of us needs to know. He believes in an identifiable body of knowledge (factual information and traditional lore) that Americans must master to read well, function in the modern world, and participate in a democracy. He coins the term *cultural literacy* to represent "the information, attitudes, and assumptions that literate Americans share" (p.127).

Hirsch argues that the well-documented achievement decline of American students is due to the faulty educational theories and values underlying the curriculum. The modern school curriculum is based on a theory of "educational formalism," a developmental approach traced back to Jean Jacques Rousseau. Formalism views literacy as a set of techniques or skills mastered through practice. In teach-



ing, it has emphasized acquiring skills, while mastery of content has been seriously neglected. For example, in formalism reading is primarily a decoding process that pays little attention to reading for meaning.

Hirsch cites several reading research studies showing that, far from merely decoding, readers supply a good deal of background information not in the text but essential to their understanding. Based on his review of twenty years of reading research, he concludes: "The explicit meanings of a piece of writing are the tip of an iceberg of meaning; the larger part lies below the surface of the text and is composed of the reader's own relevant knowledge" (p.33-34). Hirsch demonstrates convincingly that reading and writing are dependent on background knowledge and are *cumulative* activities; the more students read, the more information they learn to apply to future reading.

Hirsch attributes the failures of modern schooling to its developmental curriculum that teaches reading, writing, and critical thinking as general skills. However, much evidence suggests that this approach is misguided. The author cites recent research showing that cognitive skills depend on models or schemata specific to a particular task. Hirsch concludes that the educational programs that now teach general skills are ineffective. Instead, the schools should teach a curriculum strong in traditional information and culture.

In *Cultural Literacy*, Hirsch convincingly demonstrates that modern curriculum designers have taken a wrong path, ignoring the important research of the last twenty years on language, memory, and cognitive skills. Although he argues strongly and persuasively, he concludes with a balanced and conciliatory statement. He advocates that all educators work together to promote literacy: "Facts and skills are inseparable. There is no insurmountable reason why those who advocate the teaching of higher order skills and those who advocate the teaching of common traditional content should not join forces" (p.133).

Following the books's text is a sixty-four-page appendix that is engaging, tantalizing, and frustrating and should not be

skipped over. Entitled "What Literate Americans Know," it is a list of names, terms, dates, events, literary works, and sayings intended as a guide to our literate culture. Unless you know the significance of Diana (Artemis), *comme il faut*, Fresno (California), op art, Planck's constant, and vestal virgin, you will begin to wonder how well you were educated. The list is challenging, even though it was developed to correspond to a high school literacy level. Hirsch plans a follow-up publication to give the associations that the terms should evoke in the mind of a literate person.

Several of Hirsch's theses are similar to those of Bloom and Boyer. Bloom is also critical of developmental approaches that emphasize personal growth over mastery of content. Hirsch and Boyer share a deep concern over the incoherence and fragmentation of the curriculum. All three authors grapple with the important question of what an educated person should know.

#### WHAT DO OUR 17-YEAR-OLDS KNOW?

In their respective works, Allan Bloom and Ernest Boyer comment on the failure of high schools to educate and prepare students adequately for college. Their views are supported by the results of the First National Assessment of History and Literature (NAHL), administered to high school juniors in 1986. The test, consisting of multiple-choice questions, was designed to measure basic information in history and literature. The questions were not designed to be difficult; it was assumed that the students would be able to answer most of them. In describing their expectations in *What Do Our 17-Year-Olds Know?*, the developers of NAHL, Diane Ravitch and Chester Finn, state "there are some things almost all students should know by the time they are juniors in high school" (p.200-201). According to the scale adopted, 100 is a perfect score and below 60 is failing. In the history portion, the national average was 54.5, while in literature, the average was 51.8; thus, the average student failed both parts. The history score is especially disappointing since most of the questions were on American

history and 78.4 percent of the students tested were enrolled in U.S. history classes at the time. Most of the others had taken U.S. history in the ninth or tenth grade.

The authors planned a history and literature assessment because recent efforts to strengthen the curriculum had largely ignored these two subjects. As the educational reform movement swept the states, additional science and mathematics courses were most often mandated. The authors believed that courses of substance in history and literature are no longer an integral part of the high school curriculum, having been replaced by amorphous courses under the umbrellas of "social studies" and "language arts."

Both authors are prominent educators, which undoubtedly helped them develop the resources needed for this important assessment. Diane Ravitch is adjunct professor of History and Education at Teachers College, Columbia University, and author of several important works on education. Chester E. Finn is professor of education and public policy at Vanderbilt University and currently serves as assistant secretary of the U.S. Department of Education. Funding for the project was secured from the National Endowment for the Humanities. An agreement was reached with the National Assessment of Educational Progress to develop and administer the test.

The philosophical basis of the assessment is cultural literacy. NAHL was designed to test the background knowledge eleventh graders should possess and to elicit information on the cultural content offered and learned in American classrooms. The authors quote E. D. Hirsch, Jr., and agree with his views on reading and background information as well as the importance of cultural content and traditional lore in the curriculum. The process of developing the questions revealed differences in assessing knowledge of history versus literature. The task force developing history questions agreed on a common body of historical knowledge that all students should know. However, since there is no standard or authoritative curriculum for high school English, the literature questions were difficult to de-

velop; the literature task force could not assume that all students had read certain authors or works. Therefore the literature test assessed a number of different elements: the curriculum (what is taught); student knowledge (what is retained); and inherited and popular culture.

In the concluding chapter, the authors make more than twenty specific recommendations to improve the teaching and learning of history and literature. The recommendations are closely related to the preceding discussion of test results, so many seem obvious. For example, it is recommended that (1) a coherent literature curriculum be developed for all grades through high school, and that (2) more time be devoted to teaching literature in all grades. Although few of the recommendations are innovative, they are solid, well argued, consistent with the recommendations of other reform reports, and likely to be supported by educators prominent in the movement.

#### *THE EDUCATION OF A TEACHER*

Howard Wolf's collection of essays spans his long career as a college English professor, spent primarily at the State University of New York at Buffalo. The essays reveal a man who has a unique sense of history and the ability to discern and analyze new social and political trends at their outset. Wolf gives lively and vivid accounts of his teaching experiences, skillfully relating them to current social, political, and cultural events. In his essays covering the cold war, the Vietnam War and student activism, the human potential movement, and the current climate of student careerism, he explores the connections between higher education and American culture.

He shares with Bloom and Hirsch an interest in the debate over content versus process in the classroom:

As I have tried to make sense of my own teaching experience, it has become clear to me that most teachers and students either uphold content and cognition at the expense of interpersonal and intrapsychic dynamics, or they promote the expressive implications of humanistic psychology at the expense of rationality (p.64).

Although Wolf acknowledges a commit-

ment to what is taught (content), he speaks on behalf of process. The most interesting and provocative essays are those describing the use of encounter group techniques to teach literature. Writing in 1969, Wolf describes the rather radical evolution of a new course he developed called "Literature of Mental Crisis and Madness." The twenty-five students responded with hostility to the readings that included Freud, Jung, and Dostoevsky. They suggested abandoning the readings and analyzing the personal crises of class members instead. Wolf agreed to this and allowed the class to meet several times in a student's apartment instead of the assigned classroom. Wolf concluded that, although the group had successfully built feelings of trust and closeness, it was not possible to teach a traditional course and at the same time respond to the developmental needs of students. Traditional courses are closed systems with a beginning and an end. However, Wolf does believe that teachers have the power to alter the vision of a class from being fragmented and course-conscious to being open to experience and self-discovery.

Wolf's philosophy of teaching is essentially developmental; he encourages students to be expressive, imaginative, and to integrate thought and feeling. His approach to teaching has been influenced by the human potential movement and psychoanalytic theory. He has a strong interest in analyzing the interpersonal and affective dimension of the classroom, which he views as "a laboratory for human development" (p.74). Wolf's commitment to the developmental theory is contrary to the conclusions reached in *Cultural Literacy*; Hirsch criticizes it for not recognizing the importance of transmitting to students specific cultural information.

Wolf's teaching philosophy is grounded in the 1960s, when he believes significant

gains were made on personal, social, and political fronts. During that decade, Wolf experimented and took risks, enriching his teaching by borrowing from other disciplines. He developed new courses on unusual topics (mental crisis and madness) and sometimes substituted student journals and essays for the assigned literature readings. In his evolution as a teacher, the sixties and early seventies appear to have been a creative and productive period.

In *The Closing of the American Mind*, Allan Bloom also devotes a chapter to the transformation of education in the sixties, viewing this period as a disaster for universities, largely because curriculum requirements were dropped and the whole idea of a core curriculum was abandoned. According to Bloom, the resulting elective curriculum was very weak on substantive content, and there was no longer any standard for what knowledge constitutes a university education.

Although Bloom's views are conservative and Wolf's are liberal, their works can be compared through their many common elements, including the university setting, the period covered (1950-80), and the interwoven themes of education, politics, and culture. On specific issues, they are often diametrically opposed. Wolf looks with wonder at the educational transformation in universities in the sixties. However, for Bloom this period was characterized by self-indulgent teaching and learning, when students were not held to rigorous studies in philosophy, history, and literature. In conclusion, both authors engage the reader by demonstrating their commitment to teaching and involvement with their students. Both authors also describe the university in its social and political context, as an institution that mirrors contemporary culture.